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ABSTRACT

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A Neophyte Early Childhood Teacher's Developing Relationships with Parents: An Ecological Perspective

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Abstract

Research has shown that close ties between early childhood teachers and parents are helpful for children, but many teachers have mixed feelings about, or feel unprepared for, such relationships. This study, drawn from a larger study of preservice and beginning teachers, used narrative inquiry to trace the development of an early childhood teacher's relationships with parents during her first 2 years of teaching. Interviews and an audiotaped journal provided material for construction of the narrative, which illustrates the teacher's gradual shift from a focus on self-preservation toward responsiveness and collaboration. The findings highlight the ecological nature of teacher–parent relationships and the integral role of teachers' personal qualities such as a commitment to reflection on professional practice and the capacity for empathy. Implications for fostering parent–teacher relationships and directions for further inquiry are considered.

Introduction

Despite the consensus that close links between parents and early childhood eductors are highly beneficial (see for example, Blenkin & Kelly, 1997; Katz, 1982; Shimoni, 1991; Stonehouse, 1994), many teachers' relationships with parents are tinged with ambivalence and even antipathy (Bernhard et al., 1998; Craig, 1998; Langenbrunner & Thornburg, 1980; Sharpe, 1991; Swick & McNight, 1989). Likewise, many early childhood student teachers feel unprepared for, or underestimate, their roles and responsibilities in developing relationships with parents (Morris & Taylor, 1998; McBride, 1989; Sumsion, 1997b). The cross-sectional survey methods used in most previous studies (see also Jones, White, Abey, & Benson, 1997; Kontos, Raikes, &

Woods, 1983), however, preclude in-depth exploration of the nuances in the relationships between early childhood professionals and parents and how these relationships develop over time (Shpancer, 1998). In contrast, the longitudinal study reported in this article, which was drawn from a larger study of preservice and beginning teachers, traces one early childhood teacher's relationships with parents during her first 2 years of teaching.

Research Perspective

Rather than survey methods, the present study adopts narrative inquiry techniques because, as Richardson (1990) reminds us, narrative is a fundamentally human way of making sense of life experiences. Interpersonal relationships are a fundamental part of those life experiences. Essentially, relationships involve "patterns of interactions, expectations, beliefs and affects organized at a level more abstract than observable behaviors" (Pianta, 1997, p. 14). Narrative inquiry has the potential to convey the complexity, dramas, tensions, and richness of interpersonal relationships in everyday life in early childhood settings and to enable a nuanced understanding of these phenomena (McLean, 1991). Moreover, by focusing attention on early childhood practitioners and parents, rather than the researcher, narrative accounts can provide a useful basis for reflection (Blenkin & Kelly, 1997). The account presented below invites practitioners, parents, teacher educators, and researchers to reflect on influences contributing to, or constraining, the nurturing and sustaining of relationships between practitioners and parents and to consider possible implications for practice.

Context

Pia (pseudonyms are used throughout to preserve confidentiality), the neophyte teacher featured in this article, graduated from an Australian university shortly after celebrating her 21st birthday. Her 3-year Bachelor of Teaching (Early Childhood) degree qualified her to work with children from birth to 8 years of age. By her final year of study, Pia demonstrated many of the qualities and skills expected of early childhood graduates (Sumsion, 1997b). The emphasis she placed on establishing warm and supportive relationships with children, however, did not seem to extend explicitly to establishing similarly warm and supportive relationships with parents. In Pia's words: "There was a big emphasis [in the preservice program] on parents and the important role that they play. But I remember thinking, 'Yeah, yeah, okay, they're important, but they drop their kid off, and off they go.'" The study reported in this article provided an opportunity to investigate any changes in these initial perceptions during her first years of teaching.

Immediately after graduation, Pia accepted a permanent position as the teacher–director of a Department of School Education (now Department of Education and Training) preschool in Sydney, Australia. The appointment took effect in February at the beginning of the school year. Pia was to replace the previous incumbent, Mrs. Thomas, who, after 14 years at the preschool, had recently retired. Margaret, the other member of the preschool staff, was an untrained assistant and had been appointed a few months earlier.

The preschool was located in a far corner of the grounds of a local primary school. The school served a low to mid socioeconomic community not far from Pia's parental home where she had lived while attending university and continued to live during her first 2

years of teaching. The preschool catered to fifty 4-year-olds from a range of cultural backgrounds. Children attended daily, in two groups, for a 2.5-hour session.

There was little contact between the preschool and the school. Pia's supervisor, the assistant principal of the school, had no background in early childhood education and told Pia: *"I won't really be able to help you, but I'm sure that you will do what needs to be done."* Despite her supervisor's confidence, Pia felt *"very aware of the limits set by the school,"* particularly the expectation (as interpreted by Pia from her supervisor's comments) that *"parents aren't involved very much at all. There seems to be a feeling that some things are very definitely the teacher's job."*

Constructing the Narrative

During her first 2 years of teaching, Pia participated in six in-depth, individual interviews about her experiences as a beginning teacher. Four of these interviews, which were approximately 1 hour in duration, were held after hours in the preschool, and two were held on the university campus. Pia also took part in three small group interviews with three other beginning teachers from her graduating cohort. These interviews were also conducted on the university campus and varied in duration from 90 to 150 minutes. In addition, Pia agreed to keep an audiotaped journal.

All of the interviews were unstructured and, like the audio journal, provided an opportunity for free-ranging reflection. Pia was not asked specifically about her relationships with parents but was invited to elaborate when the topic arose. Transcripts of the interviews and the audio journal, as well as a draft of the narrative account presented below, were returned to Pia for verification. These naturalistic methods and the extended period of data collection contributed to the authenticity of the data.

The narrative that follows was developed by identifying sections of the interview and audiotaped transcripts that made mention of parents, and cutting and pasting these onto cards for ease of manipulation. Data were analyzed for critical incidents (Tripp, 1993) and emergent themes. Narrative fragments (Blenkin & Kelly, 1997) that best reflected these incidents and themes were then arranged chronologically and in a way that attempted to capture the "complexity, specificity and interconnectedness" of the issues involved (Goodfellow, 1998a, p. 176). Some editing took place to preserve coherency and continuity, although most of what follows is verbatim. Pia's voice now takes over (with the exception of the subheadings, which are the constructions of the author). This change in voice is indicated by indented text. Parents' voices and those of other teachers, as interpreted by Pia, are represented by the use of italics.

February 1996: Establishing an Identity, Striving for Acceptance

> Everyone else on the [school] staff is so much older than me. I get the feeling that the parents are wondering who I am. *She's **very** young*, they seem to be saying. Mrs. Thomas was a middle-aged woman, and she had everything down to a T! I know that I will have to prove myself, but being so young, I will have to be very careful. I find that I'm always thinking, "I hope I meet their expectations. I hope that they will think that

I'm a good teacher." Some parents, though, seem to think, *Well, she's just finished studying, so she'll have good ideas,* and that helps.

Many of the parents have older children who went through the preschool when Mrs. Thomas was the director. Everyday those parents ask me why we are no longer doing things the same way as Mrs. Thomas. I find that really irritating. While I want to please them, and have some continuity, at the same time, I'm trying to get them to understand that there will be changes, and that they won't necessarily be negative changes. And I've found that really hard.

March 1996: Struggling for Control

I'm finding one parent especially pushy. Sometimes I feel a bit overwhelmed by her. This week, for example, she offered to take library time. I've set up a library, and on Fridays the children can borrow books. I have a roster for parents to help out. And, of course, she offered to put her name down for the first week. I told her the time that I had allocated for the library, and she said, *No. I can't do it at that time. But get the kids to select their books, and I'll come back later to record what they've borrowed.* And I thought, "Well, **I'm** the person who is supposed to be making the decisions about the library and about what works best for the children," and here was this parent coming in and telling me to rearrange my routine. I didn't take a stand because I want to try to please the parents. Let's face it, they are the users of the service, and it's important that their needs are being met. But in this particular instance, I felt that I should have stood up to her more.

At this stage, I think that it's best for Margaret and me and the kids to get to know each other without the parents. But one parent invites herself in all the time. Once or twice she has reprimanded the children and she shouldn't do that! I know that I'm not firm enough with her, but I feel as if I'm not strong enough yet to talk with parents about what they should and shouldn't be doing.

One of the parents who has older kids at the school asked me if she could come into the preschool after she had dropped them off, instead of waiting around at the bus stop for 45 minutes. I couldn't say to her, "No, it doesn't suit me," so I said "If you want to stay until your bus comes, that's okay." But she didn't just stay **until** the bus came. She stayed **all** morning. And now she's spending **more** and **more** time in here. The other parents have seen her in here and quite understandably have been asking, *When can we come in and help? Why is Susie's mum always here?* So I'm getting a bit of unrest amongst the

parents, but I think that I can get on top of it.

I **have** to get a roster started. But I probably won't have more than one parent come in at a time. Susie is really unsettled on the days her mother stays. And I don't want to risk that happening with other kids because we are still all getting settled.

April 1996: Balancing Needs, Honoring Beliefs

I'm trying to organise one thing at a time. I need time to think about the things that I want to do. Sometimes I feel that every parent wants something different. And some parents want answers straight away. When I say that I need time to think about it, they don't seem to realise that I mean for more than a few hours. One parent must have picked up from my tone that I was feeling hassled and pressured, and I felt really bad about that.

This has been a bad week, actually. The parents want me to do Easter stencils and have an Easter concert like they used to have with Mrs. Thomas, but I don't want to do that. I don't like the idea of children having to perform. I appreciate that it's Easter and that the parents would like to see something, but I was going to collect some of the children's work and have them help me make it into books and give them to their parents. That was going to be the special Easter event. But it seems that the parents are expecting something more. So I'm filled with a lot of mixed feelings and concerns about living up to parents' expectations about what kind of Easter celebrations I should have. Should I have the children "performing," which is what the parents expect, or should I have something more relevant to the children?

May 1996: Developing Confidence

I decided to go with Easter celebrations that were meaningful to the children. And the real reward for me was when a parent whose daughter was at the preschool last year, too, came up to me and said, *Thank you very much. It was so great to see Jessica involved. Last year it was so above her level that she just wasn't part of it at all.* And another parent said the same thing about her daughter. So to get this sort of feedback from parents after only one term was really rewarding.

I guess it taught me to go with what I believe in. But at the same time, I realise now, you have to justify what you are doing, and there needs to be open communication with parents so that they know where you are coming from, because your aims and objectives might not always be perfectly clear. And

that's where problems might tend to arise.

July 1996: Becoming Responsive

Eve has finally settled, and there have been no more tears! She had found it really hard to separate from her dad. He refused to leave while she was crying, so often he would be there for 40 minutes—if he didn't decide to take her home again. The other teachers said to me, *Just tell Dad to leave.* But I couldn't find it in my heart to do that, even though the situation became really frustrating. This has been another example where I followed what I really believed in—that is, that when Eve was ready, she would let go of Dad, that she needed to wait until she felt safe and comfortable, and that that would eventually happen. And sure enough, it did. I'm pleased with the way that I handled that situation. Her dad wrote to me saying how grateful he was that I hadn't asked him to leave, even though he knew that was what I had been thinking.

So that has been a situation which has turned out well, except that when I am not here, Eve still gets very upset and her father takes her home again. I usually try to let the parents know when I won't be in, and when I do that, Eve doesn't show up. That concerns me because I feel that it will be very hard for her when she starts school if she hasn't built up any coping mechanisms. I'm wondering whether I should arrange a time to talk to her mum and dad or whether I should leave it for another term or so and deal with it when it's closer to the time when she will be starting school. I will need to think about that a bit more.

September 1996: Recognizing Complexities

Some of the parents have been asking me whether I think their children are ready for school next year. And in some cases it's really difficult—like Jim. He's developed well this year, but I don't think he is ready for kindergarten [the first year of school]. But his grandmother won't be able to keep looking after him as often as she is. And I don't think that Alex is ready to start school, either. It's really difficult for his mum, though, because she has three children under 5, and I know that a whole-day program would suit her much better.

February 1997: Valuing Relationships

I'm feeling a lot more confident, and I'm finding the parents much less stressful. Lots of parents have come in to ask for help. One parent has been having behavioural problems with her child at home. I was able to pass on some literature and to arrange for her to speak to the school counsellor. And I've

arranged for another child to see an occupational therapist.

I see so many kids over in the school who seem to be almost written off as a lost cause. I can understand the teachers' point of view when they have tried to do so much for these kids in terms of providing alternative programs. They say that there is no point because it's reinforced at home. But I've found that most parents will go to almost any lengths to work together with the teacher to help their kids. And I've learned how important that is. I feel that there is now a lot more communication happening between the parents and myself, and I hope to continue that.

March 1997: Managing Tensions

An incident has happened that has really affected me. One child last year had a major speech problem. I sat down with his parents, and we worked out a program for him. I recommended that he wait another year before he started school, and I offered to take him for another year, but his parents didn't want that. So I gave them a report to take to the school [in a nearby suburb]. But I've just heard through a friend who teaches at that school that his kindergarten teacher has been saying, *How is it possible that this child has attended preschool for a year and nothing has been documented or reported? Is this another case of a child having slipped through the system?* That really got to me, so I phoned the school to ask how the kids from our preschool were going. And the kindergarten teacher said, *Oh, I'm so glad you've called. I've been really worried about Anthony.*

I explained that I had been very concerned about him, too, and that I had written reports for his parents to take to the school. She hadn't been given those. So I faxed her copies of my reports and of my observations, and of tests that had been done, and she was ever so grateful. If I'd sat back and not done anything for him, then I'd have to accept that. But we did **so much** for him!

At the end of last year, when his parents said that they would speak to his kindergarten teacher, I didn't feel that I then had a right to contact the school. Maybe the parents thought that if they didn't say anything to the teacher, then she wouldn't notice that anything was wrong. Perhaps, in their culture, it's not a good thing to have a child with special needs. But I guess that this year, I will have to explain to parents of kids with special needs that I would like to send the reports straight off to the schools rather than giving them the reports to take. Hopefully, that will avoid what happened with Anthony.

May 1997: Sharing Triumphs

I must tell you this! Do you remember Jacob? We had so many concerns about him. His parents are really grateful for all the work we did with him last year. And I've got his younger sister this year, so I'm still in close contact with them. We have a great relationship, which is nice, because they could easily have become a bit resentful. Like any parents, they could have thought, *There's nothing wrong with my child!*

Anyway, Jacob had been at school for a whole term now and still hadn't played with anyone. But his mum rushed in yesterday and said: *Pia, I have to share something with you and Margaret because I don't feel as if I can share it with anyone else. I was walking though the playground today, and Jacob took another child's hand and came running up to me!* And then she burst into tears. *Oh, I'm silly to be crying,* she said, *but it's just so hard always seeing your child by himself. And now, suddenly, he's got a friend!*

August 1997: Providing Reassurance

We've just had a Teddy Bear's picnic. The kids were so excited about it that we had to count down the "sleeps!" They were going to do some songs and dances with their teddies, and the parents were coming in to watch. I had this feeling all along about Jack. When we practised, he was fine. But on the day, as soon as he arrived, he said that he didn't want to take part. I said, "That's okay. Maybe you'll change your mind when the time comes, but if you still don't want to do it, that's fine." As it turned out, he didn't join in. He wouldn't even let go of his mum's leg.

She was really upset, but a few days later she said to me, *I'm really glad Jack has a teacher like you because I had a lot of really negative experiences when I went to school. I was really shy—a lot like Jack. And my teachers always made me do things and I ended up being even more introverted as an adult than I was as a child. And I'm scared that's going to happen to Jack. And I'm really concerned that when he goes to kindergarten, he might have a teacher who says, "You have to do it."* I was pleased that she had been able to confide in me, but I couldn't give her any guarantees about the next teacher he might have.

December 1997: Creating a Community

We've just had our end-of-year get-together. At lunch time, Margaret and I looked up, and the parents from the morning and afternoon groups were sitting together in small groups on

> the grass with the kids. They were talking about the kids and the issues they are all dealing with at the moment—things like: *My child is doing this. Does your child react the same way? Is that normal?* They seemed really relaxed and at ease. Then later, when we had the dancing, we invited the parents to join. I had been worried about that. We're quite limited in the amount of space we have, and the parents always bring so many Aunties and Uncles as well, and so many extra children! But Margaret encouraged me, and I'm so glad she did! It was the most **successful** and **rewarding** experience—a wonderful end to the year!

Interpreting the Narrative

Pia's narrative reveals a distinct shift in her relationships with parents during her first 2 years of teaching. Initially uncertain as to whether she would be accepted by parents, insecure about her professional identity, and overwhelmed by the many demands facing her as a neophyte teacher, Pia's major concern was her perceived vulnerability. She struggled to create a space in which she could establish a sense of professional identity and autonomy—a space that she believed could only be maintained by keeping as much distance between herself and parents as possible. When parents threatened to invade this space, she tried to tightly control their access.

Her commitment to the children and concern for their well-being, however, ultimately thwarted these defensive strategies of isolation and control. When children's needs for parental presence and support in the classroom as they made the transition from home to preschool conflicted with her self-protective need to distance parents, the children's needs took precedence. Moreover, Pia found that as parents established an initially uninvited presence in her classroom, it became harder to continue to restrict their access. Yet, the more parents became involved, the more she became attuned to their perspectives and concerns. Increasingly, she realized that she was able to assist and support parents, and, as she gained their confidence and trust, her professional confidence soared. Slowly, Pia dismantled the earlier barriers she had erected to distance herself from parents, and gradually a sense of relationship and community emerged.

This shift in focus from self-preservation toward responsiveness and collaboration was gradual. Her need for isolation and control resurfaced in moments of insecurity; as she struggled with ongoing tensions and professional dilemmas, her emphasis on control and her receptivity to collaboration fluctuated considerably. If visualized as a continuum, however, Pia's response to parents moved unmistakably from a previous preoccupation with self-protective power toward the establishment of mutually supportive relationships based on respect, trust, and open communication.

It is interesting to speculate about why Pia became increasingly responsive to parents, given what might be described as inauspicious circumstances. Her preservice program seemed not to have been particularly influential in fostering in her a strong commitment to parents. The culture of the school appeared not to value close relationships with parents. She had no colleagues able to provide positive role models in building relationships with parents. Nor did she take part in any professional development programs focusing on promoting parent participation.

Although Pia's growing responsiveness to parents coincided with an emerging sense of professional identity, the associated development in her personal and professional confidence, in itself, does not explain why she become increasingly attuned to parents. After all, most of the far more experienced teachers in the school, who presumably had a well-developed sense of professional identity, had not established particularly close relationships with parents. It seemed that in a professional context not especially conducive to fostering parent–teacher relationships, Pia's personal qualities were instrumental. Three of these qualities—her propensity to reflect on her practice (see also Sumsion, 1997a), her commitment to children, and her capacity for empathy—seemed particularly important and are discussed below.

Pia's emphasis on reflection was evident in her tendency to revisit her experiences, to continue to refine her professional beliefs, and to consider their implications for her practice (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985). Indeed, her conversations with herself about her practice permeated much of her narrative. Even during the height of her self-perceived vulnerability, she recognized that the tensions and dilemmas that she encountered in her practice could be viewed from a range of perspectives. In a context of uncertainty and complexity, exacerbated by her lack of experience, she drew on insights generated by these different perspectives to guide her professional judgments.

Underpinning Pia's decision making was her commitment to ensuring that children were supported by strong, nurturing relationships. To Pia, promoting a close, caring relationship between child and teacher, and between child and parents, was integral to her professional role. Yet, although she respected the complementary contributions of teacher and parents, initially she envisaged that she could work largely in isolation from parents.

The mutual commitment to children that she shared with parents, however, seemed to act as a conduit that inexorably connected Pia to parents. This emerging sense of connectedness, to paraphrase Goodfellow (1996, p. 4), could also be attributed to Pia's attempts to understand the parents' perspectives and the meaning they gave to situations. Her capacity to recognize and appreciate different perspectives appeared to enhance her capacity for empathy or ability "to move outside oneself" (Goodfellow, 1997, p. 3) and into "the shoes of other[s]" (Holman, 1994, p. 72). As empathy, by its very nature, necessitates loosening the boundaries around oneself (Jordan, 1991), her initial preference for isolation and control as means of self-preservation soon became unsustainable. In short, the interconnections between Pia's propensity to reflect on her practice, her shared commitment to children's well-being, and her empathy for parents and children, appear to explain why Pia was able to transcend her initial ambivalence toward parents.

Implications of the Narrative

Pia's narrative supports calls for reconceptualizing interpersonal relationships in early childhood programs from an ecological perspective (e.g., Elicker, 1997; McLean, 1991; Pianta, 1997). Essentially, an ecological perspective recognizes that "everything is connected to everything else" (Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998, p. 168) and that these interconnections are fluid, not static. Ecosystems such as the relationships in early childhood settings are best understood, therefore, by exploring their dynamic nature

rather than by trying to tease out their constitutive components.

Most previous studies into teacher–parent relationships in early childhood settings, in contrast, have tended to see teachers and parents as separate entities (Haseloff, 1990; Henry, 1996; Shpancer, 1998). Critics argue that the studies' relatively narrow focus on elements perceived to be discrete contributing factors to parent–teacher relationships (e.g., rates of parent–teacher contact, teachers' perceptions of parents' competence as caregivers, or parents' satisfaction with the program provided by the child care setting) has tended to obscure the complexity of these relationships. As Shpancer (1998), for example, points out, it is not the day-to-day contact rates between parents and teachers that are important but the responsiveness of their relationships. In times of adverse changes in circumstances, for instance, do parents and teacher become closer, as happened in Pia's situation, or are they more inclined to withdraw?

To address questions such as these, we need to focus more on the complexity and dynamics of such relationships. Shpancer (1998) contends that there has been little consideration, for example, of how children might shape teacher–parent relationships, even though it is widely accepted that adults are influenced by children's behaviors. The pivotal role children played in Pia's developing relationships with parents supports his call to extend traditional conceptualizations of the "parent–teacher dyad" to at least encompass children as part of a broader ecological perspective. A greater emphasis on dynamic interconnections could also include more attention to the role of emotions and the part they play in relationships in early childhood settings. As Hargreaves (1997) points out, and as Pia's narrative illustrates, emotions are fundamental to teaching, to making sense of one's work as teacher, and to developing (or constraining) relationships between parents and teachers.

The importance of empathy, for example, underpins Pia's narrative and reinforces calls to recognize the centrality of caring relationships in early childhood settings. Caring relationships are characterized by mutual responsiveness and respectfulness rather than imbalances in status and power (Goodfellow, 1997, 1998b). Professional development programs (both preservice and inservice), then, may need to move beyond their traditional emphasis on teacher-initiated activities such as "drawing up rosters, getting parents to assist in special outings, or even making a home visit now and again" (Haseloff, 1990, p. 54), with parents seemingly assumed to be the passive recipients of teacher initiatives.

Mutually responsive relationships seem more likely to flourish if such programs focus more on the interconnectedness of parents and teachers through their mutual commitment to children and on exploring ways to enhance and celebrate this connectedness (Haseloff, 1990; Henry, 1996). This focus might involve providing opportunities for teachers (and student teachers) to participate in informal exchanges in which they are able to share stories of their experiences and explore concerns within a supportive environment. Such exchanges can generate new possibilities and expand professional horizons about how current practices might be enriched (Blenkin & Kelly, 1997). Opportunities for parents and teachers to exchange experiences would appear even more useful in promoting an understanding of different perspectives and in fostering empathy.

Pia's narrative suggests that, as well as her capacity for empathy, her ability to reflect on

her practice was instrumental in her emerging relationships with parents. This finding reinforces the need for preservice and inservice programs to promote a reflective orientation to professional practice. Narratives such as Pia's (and even better, those written by early childhood practitioners and parents themselves) could serve as "case stories" (Patterson & Fleet, 1998, p. 72) through which to highlight the complexity of teacher–parent relationships and to explore influences that might promote or constrain their development. They could also encourage teachers and student teachers to engage in ongoing reflection on their own practice and to undertake action research into their own relationships with parents. Indeed, given the importance of interpersonal dynamics to parent–teacher relationships, practitioner research—in which teachers investigate their own practice—seems highly appropriate (and long overdue) in efforts to enhance our understanding of parent–teacher relationships.

Conclusion

The above account of Pia's emerging interpersonal relationships with parents highlights the ecological nature of parent–teacher relationships. Considerably more exploration—from the perspective of both teachers and parents—will be needed, however, to more fully understand the dynamics of these relationships. The present study suggests that narrative inquiry can make a valuable contribution to this research by enabling fine-grained investigation of the nuances of such relationships and as a vehicle for encouraging reflection about how they might be enhanced.

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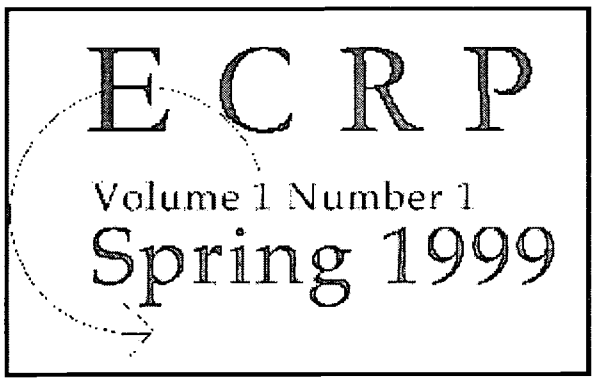

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